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ABSTRACT

The implementation of appropriate planning strategies can increase the probability that local school districts will successfully cope with change and meet the expectations of their communities. But educational planning does not guarantee that everyone will agree on the qualitative nature of the educational services provided. This paper outlines seven postulates and six propositions relating to planning, an activity that every school district should conduct in an organized manner. These postulates and propositions are intended to encourage local school district personnel to (1) analyze and evaluate their planning capabilities, (2) consider the development of an improved educational planning capability, and (3) reflect on the issue of quality education as it is perceived among the various constituencies in local districts. (Author/DS)

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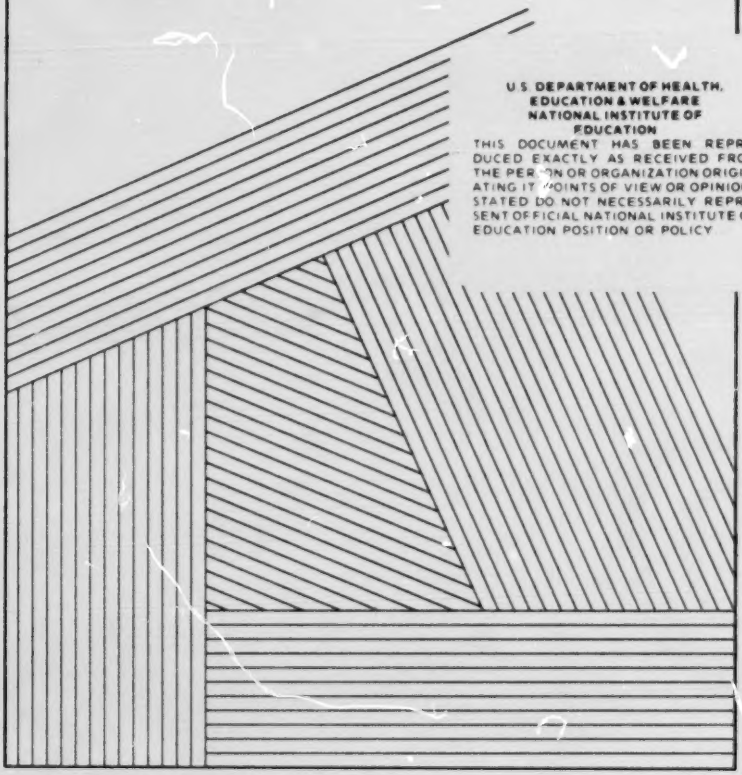

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
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LOCAL DISTRICT EDUCATIONAL PLANNING: SOME CONSIDERATIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS AND SCHOOL BOARDS

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LOCAL DISTRICT EDUCATIONAL PLANNING: SOME CONSIDERATIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS AND SCHOOL BOARDS

Introduction

The subject of this paper is educational planning, which is defined as "the process of preparing sets of decisions for action in the future directed at achieving goals by optimum means."

Educational planning, like many other components of the school system, always seems to be in the process of becoming. By its very nature the planning cycle is never completed or finalized, either in its structure or function. No matter what planning activities are completed or how successful they are there are always new problems and needs to address, and the inevitable recycling of the old. This dilemma, though it is frustrating and discouraging to some people, is not unique to the educational arena; it describes most other areas of human endeavor as well. And rather than serving as a reason why planning is not worthwhile or necessary, it is one of the best reasons why planning is among the more necessary ingredients of an effective and dynamic school system.

This paper presents several postulates (assumptions, presuppositions) about the general state of educational planning in Wisconsin and offers some tenable propositions of a futures-orientation regarding the need for local district planning capabilities. The intent of the paper is to stimulate and encourage local school district personnel to: (1) analyze and evaluate their planning capabilities, (2) consider the development of an improved planning capability, and (3) to reflect on the issue of quality education as it is perceived among and between the various constituents in local school districts.

No attempt will be made to cite supportive research. Some of the suggested postulates and propositions would survive the test of empirical evidence; others are expressions of experience, observation, and values and as such are less subject to the rigors of scientific validation. The seven planning postulates discussed herein are by no means exhaustive; their inclusion in this paper along with the six planning proposition statements are warranted by their significance as major considerations which should be carefully examined by educational managers at all levels.

The Postulates

The following statements are labeled "postulates" because they are essentially assumptions or hypotheses which are neither documented nor proved in this paper.

Postulate 1: Every local school district has a need for educational planning.

This statement, although obvious and superficial to some degree, contains a basic fact of existence for school district personnel. Even if services, programs, personnel, policies, and public demands and expectations were static there would be a need for routine operational planning just to keep the system operating smoothly. As knowledgeable educators and school board members are aware, however, the climate and context within which the schools operate are dynamic rather than stagnant, active rather than passive. At the present time there is no danger of exhausting the topics to which planning efforts might be directed.

Every district in the mid-1970's must be concerned not only with changing local needs and expectations but must cope with new state level legislative mandates which have placed at the doorsteps of every local school board extensive new demands for specialized programs, services and personnel.

Superimposed upon these new and increased responsibilities are considerations related to the continually changing organization and technology of the teaching/learning process. The self-contained, one-teacher classroom of yesteryear, equipped with textbooks and a blackboard, need not be considered long to see in striking contrast the multitude and variety of instructional and organizational patterns, strategies, techniques, materials, and hardware available in most classrooms today.

The need for continuous and improved planning is, as stated above, perhaps so obvious that it requires no discussion. It is a reality, however, that must be lived with and therefore worthy of occasional restatement and reconsideration.

Postulate 2: Every school district has a history of planning.

Each of Wisconsin's 435 local school districts has planned, and continues to plan, for considerable variety in the degree, scope, and quality of the

educational services offered. Variations in the planning process itself have also occurred, and this is evident in some of the differences that currently exist among school districts. These variations do not mean that other factors such as wealth, effort, enrollment size, and other possible variables are not valid considerations in evaluating the progress and the condition of the local school system. It does suggest, however, that all things being relatively equal, there are many options and alternatives available to districts over a period of years and that some choices and decisions are better than others.

Additional alternatives and decisions will continue to challenge local administrators and school boards as they respond to the many demands of the 1970's. In the 1980's the current years will be considered as part of the district's history and the planning that occurs, or does not occur, will serve as additional evidence of the validity of the postulate.

Postulate 3: Planning capabilities differ among local districts.

Given the considerations noted above, it is not surprising that districts have varied in their development and use of planning capabilities. Indeed, it would be far more unusual if several hundred school districts were to progress at a similar pace to the same destination. Nevertheless, considering the continually changing nature of the educational system and the resulting challenges confronting school administrators, it is appropriate for districts to analyze and evaluate local planning policies, strategies, and capabilities and to determine whether they are equal to today's challenges.

Just as planning interests and capabilities have differed among local districts in the past, current local capabilities range from centralized, well-staffed planning units to informal thoughts and ideas in the mind of a small-district administrator as he attempts to perform a variety of district-level tasks. In fact, the latter situation is far more common than the former, for Wisconsin districts average slightly less than 2300 pupils in enrollment, with a median district enrollment of less than 1200 students. In addition, in spite of the efforts of the state aid equalization policy and program, substantial variations among districts in property wealth per student and per pupil expenditure still exist which both cause and reflect existing differences in the general planning capabilities.

It is unrealistic to expect that any except the largest districts can afford to employ specialized personnel to perform the planning functions. It may

even be argued that only large districts have the need for full-time planners and that smaller districts can and must utilize other personnel to carry out the planning process. The debate is somewhat irrelevant however, because even if a full-time planning position need exists in most districts, the constraints of today's economy preclude significant change in numbers or types of local planning personnel to be employed.

Postulate 4: Every district has adequate resources to do some degree of planning.

Continuation of the thoughts expressed above suggest that while most districts do not have and are unlikely to add specialized planning personnel, these same districts have a need for more and better planning. It is also suggested that the overwhelming number of districts have sufficient numbers of central office staff, principals, teachers, board members, pupils, and interested citizens to meet local planning needs if personnel are properly organized and supplemented with specialized materials and skills at appropriate times.

The key to such organization is usually found in the district administrator or in board of education members who have a positive attitude toward planning, are willing to open up the process for serious involvement, and can effectively direct the efforts toward meaningful resolution of local needs, problems and issues.

Failure to have a formalized planning capability may sometimes reflect a lack of commitment rather than a lack of resources. There are few districts that cannot develop improved planning services, and often at less direct cost than that required by other programs and services competing for the limited financial resources available.

Postulate 5: Planning becomes meaningful when it is translated from abstract concepts into relevant purposes and activities.

Planning models, techniques, and procedures can be intolerably boring to local practitioners who have no particular interest in the imperfect art and science of educational planning per se. Boxes, lines, arrows, flow charts, PERT diagrams, and old cliches about involvement and participation in the planning process seldom motivate or excite the reader or listener—more often the opposite results. On the other hand, ask an administrator about

his concerns with meeting the new state educational standards or the effects of declining enrollment, or query a teacher for some thoughts regarding the development of an IGE/MUS-E school, or a principal about the need for better vocational programming in the high school and you may well receive an outburst of interest, ideas, and frustrations.

The difference of course is that in the latter examples, individuals can relate their values, problems, and responsibilities to specific portions of their daily lives, whereas the study of sterile models seems without value or practical application until the proper linkage to reality is made. Sensitive and informed local educational leaders should be able to make the translation and facilitate the transition from general planning models and processes to prioritized areas of local interest. Participants need not be turned away by meaningless technical concerns.

Postulate 6: Appropriately conducted planning will lead to usable products which serve local purposes.

It is reasonable to expect positive changes to be evident in the local district after a period of coordinated, comprehensive planning. If such is not the case after reasonable time, effort, and resources have been committed to the planning process, and after possible start-up deficiencies and defects have been corrected, there would be little rationale to support the thesis that planning is better than not planning. While specific examples will depend upon local situations and factors, it is likely that the planning process, when well performed, will show results in such areas as better identification of goals and objectives; documentation and validation of educational needs; selection of priorities; more thorough and careful consideration of alternative courses of action; less difficult implementation of new programs and services; greater concern with and application of evaluation techniques and designs; and improved communication among and between various groups within the school district.

Postulate 7: Planning can result in managerial, administrative, and instructional improvement but it is not a panacea.

Though planning should be expected to "produce", to result in positive change in the district, it should not be viewed as a quick and easy solution to long standing and/or complex problems. Unrealistically high expectations, particularly too soon after the initiation of a planning effort, could

lead to the premature and unfair conclusion that planning does not make a difference. Planning can make a difference, but planning alone is not enough.

It should be remembered that planning has always occurred but that now it is being done better. This reflection may help to explain that although new and some recycled problems and needs still persist, they are currently being addressed more effectively and efficiently. Just as medication may successfully treat a disease it cannot prevent or eradicate, so planning must be understood and applied for what it is and what it can do. Premature and unrealistic expectations will not only go unmet, but the development of a sound planning capability may suffer as a result.

The Propositions

The following statements are termed "propositions" because they are more improvement- and future-oriented. They are suggested as possibilities for specific action at the local district level.

Proposition 1: School district administrators and school boards should periodically analyze and evaluate the local planning capability.

Administrators and school board members often observe that the multitude of local, state, and federal requirements, expectations, and demands make it increasingly difficult to keep up with all the work and decisions that are required. This seems particularly true in small to medium size districts which often do not have specialized personnel in such areas as planning, evaluation, special project administration, budgeting, curriculum development, personnel administration, purchasing, transportation, food services, and other related operational areas.

If the district administrator or the school board feel that inadequacies and deficiencies exist in the local planning process and if considerable frustration is felt because time and personnel are not available to address all the issues and problems that exist, it may be an appropriate time to critically examine the situation.

If possible, a special board meeting should be held to step outside of the usual operational considerations and to look at the overall district planning

capability from a process rather than a content perspective. Some questions that might be openly discussed are suggested below:

1. How well does our district seem to perform regarding new expectations, demands, and problems that confront us? What criteria do we use to judge our district's performance? What is our performance record, i.e., are there specific successes and failures we can identify?
2. Is it possible for the superintendent to meet the planning needs of the district through his own efforts? Are there others who are actively and routinely involved in planning efforts? Is there a real need for additional staff time to be devoted to planning?
3. Does the board participate in planning, or does it react to plans? What should be the board's role in the planning process?
4. Are planning and evaluation efforts of sufficient priority that the board is willing to allocate resources to support them, or is the local commitment a superficial
5. Is the best use made of resources available? Is there a systematic coordinated approach to planning or does the district have to get organized and start anew with each new problem or issue which emerges?

These and other related questions can help to identify problem areas, clarify expectations, and suggest new strategies for further consideration and possible implementation. One evening of open discussion every several years may bring results far out of proportion to the time invested.

Proposition 2: Local school districts should consider the establishment of an advisory educational planning council.

All school districts need, and presumably want, feedback and input from the public(s) served. However, professional educators generally do not want the public to make those decisions that can best be made by professionally prepared, experienced educators. The public in turn generally wants an opportunity to influence the schools but does not want to have to make specific decisions. This basically harmonious role relationship suggests that some means should exist to promote communication between the community and the schools. In less complex times the school board may have been able to provide this linkage in a completely satisfactory way. Today, however, volunteer or near volunteer board

members often find that the demands of formulating policy and making decisions consumes more time than they can provide, and that little opportunity exists for exploratory, routine communication and interaction with the community in non-crisis, planning sessions.

In such circumstances, a district may want to consider the establishment of a local educational planning council to serve in an advisory capacity to the school board and administration. The council could include members of the general public, school board, student body, non-public schools, faculty, and administration, and still restrict membership to a manageable group of 10 to 15 persons.

Functions of the council could include:

1. Informing the board and administration of public attitudes, opinions, and expectations regarding the school system.
2. Reacting to tentative proposals and policies of the board and administration prior to final adoption or implementation.
3. Assisting in the identification of perceived needs, problems, and deficiencies within the school system.
4. Serving as a communication link between the board and administration and the community, based on a better understanding of why and how the district does things as it does.

Careful consideration and preparation would obviously be required regarding the role of the advisory council relationship to the board and administration, appointment and length of term of council members, and related topics. Many administrators and board members are understandably cautious regarding citizen advisory committees because of unpleasant situations which can develop when the advisory role and relationship are not carefully defined and adhered to. If well-conceived and properly employed, however, such groups can play a positive role in improving and maintaining school-community communication and relationships.

Proposition 3: School districts should encourage and facilitate the improvement of planning skills among all members of the professional staff.

One of the most beneficial kinds of staff inservice, professional growth and development activities in a school district, is the improvement of individual planning skills. A well thought out inservice program directed

toward the realities of the working world of local teachers and administrators could be beneficial in its impact at many levels over a sustained period of time. Classroom teachers, as well as principals and district level staff, generally need and want planning skills which are appropriate to their specific situation. Too often planning models and techniques are too sophisticated and too demanding logistically to be of practical value to the teacher who, on one hand wants to incorporate improved planning techniques, but on the other hand must face the reality of first devoting time to the primary tasks of instruction. There are a number of non-technical applications, however, which all educators should be aware of and competent in, and which do not require a computer and a Master's degree in statistics to apply.

Cooperative planning by the administration and teaching staff, perhaps in cooperation with a consultant from the DPI or a college or university, could result in the identification of local planning and evaluation needs which could be incorporated into a one-semester or one-year local inservice program that would be of potential value throughout the district on a continuing basis.

Proposition 4: Local districts, in the face of new and increased demands upon the educational system, should consider allocating sufficient resources to support at least a half-time planning position.

The unreality of the above proposal as viewed by most administrators and school board members is recognized. The suggestion is offered nevertheless in recognition of the following factors:

- The presence of continuing, changing, and often increased expectations held for the schools simply have to be responded to. The question is not if, but rather how well. New state legislation alone, in addition to federal program considerations, have placed considerable demands on local districts to focus on local problems, needs, and priorities.
- A stabilization in the rate of enrollment and a general reduction in the level of finances available for new or expanded programs has occurred. This in itself points out the increased need for improved planning capabilities in many districts as a means of assisting educational decision makers to make prudent resource allocations.
- Widespread agreement exists among many educators, board members,

and citizens that many districts have not identified their goals, objectives, needs, and priorities in a concise and valid manner which assists in allocating resources and making tentative plans for future years. Too often things "just keep happening" to which a hastily organized response must be made. The capability to look and plan ahead, to consider the implications of alternative courses of action, and to thoroughly describe, analyze, and interpret what is now being done must stop being viewed as a luxury that can't be afforded. Considering the approximately $1200 per pupil expended each year for 970,000 public school pupils or approximately $1.16 billion on a statewide basis, it is difficult to argue that the size of the operation is too small to warrant an investment in planning.

- In many districts it is presumed that the superintendent is the chief planner for the district. Though this is a logical statement, it is only accurate and realistic to a limited degree. The chief administrative officer typically functions in a variety of roles. As the manager of district resources, the chief administrator also functions as business manager, personnel director, public relations officer, and special projects administrator. With these multiple responsibilities it is unlikely that the superintendent has the time, or perhaps even the technical skills or motivation to develop a sustained and continuous planning effort. To relegate the planning functions to an "add-on-as time permits" status usually means they will never receive the time and attention needed because of more "immediate" concerns that arrive via the mail, the telephone, and the front door. If school boards were to ask superintendents, "Do you personally have time to meet the planning and evaluation needs of this district and are these needs being adequately met at this time?", some interesting and enlightening conversations would likely follow.

Proposition 5: Virtually every school district can find immediate applications and task areas for an educational planner.

A school board has the right to expect specific answers rather than broad platitudes when it asks what the principle activities and functions of a planner would be. The following list of probable planning activities is offered as illustration only; it is not intended to be all-inclusive or to represent every district's needs. It should also be noted that the planner would not be doing every part of every task alone, nor would the incumbent unilaterally be selecting the activities and assuming sole

responsibility for their completion. Rather, the role would include participant involvement and decision-making and would emphasize organizing, coordinating, motivating, facilitating and supporting the work of administrators, teachers, and community groups.

Examples of these activities might include:

1. Development of district level philosophy, goals, and objectives as well as the development of administrative and instructional goals and objectives at various levels in the system (e.g., individual schools, curricular areas, grade levels, etc.).
2. Analysis of current pupil grading, reporting, and evaluation systems including a review of the pupil performance tests used by the district referencing their utility, validity, and cost.
3. Planning for the initiation or continued implementation of special federal programs and projects in the district, e.g. E.S.E.A. I (low income pupils), E.S.E.A. III (innovative projects), E.S.E.A. VI-B (handicapped pupil programs), and preparation for the new federal consolidated program structure which becomes effective in FY 1976 (P.L. 93-380).
4. Evaluation of special federal and state funded projects which require a formal evaluation design and report to comply with funding requirements.
5. Development of proposals for special federally funded local projects in the areas of planning and evaluation under such legislation as E.S.E.A. V-C and Part C of title IV of the Education Amendments of 1974 (P.L. 93-380).
6. Design and implementation of a local educational needs assessment to identify community expectations and delineate the areas of need and priority at the local level.
7. Evaluation of instructional areas (e.g. reading at the K-3 level or vocational education at the 9-12 level) to ascertain the effectiveness and efficiency of the instructional program and to make suggestions and recommendations for change, if deemed appropriate.
8. Analysis of needs and alternatives to assure local compliance with the new 13 state educational standards and new legislation requiring appropriate educational opportunities and services for handicapped children.
9. Feasibility studies regarding new instructional techniques and modes such as flexible modular scheduling, computer assisted instruction, individually guided education in multi-unit elementary schools (MUS-E/IGE), etc.

10. Studies related to community growth and development; fiscal needs and capacity; facilities projections; and program development needs over a multi-year period.
11. Management oriented studies regarding transportation services, school food services, ancillary staff employment and training, purchasing, budgeting, personnel administration, and related areas of operation.
12. Planning and implementation of professional inservice programs to meet the individual and collective needs of teachers and administrators.

Proposition 6: If local commitment exists and resources are available, each district can develop an adequate planning component, or can initiate cooperative efforts with other districts if desired.

It is not necessary to employ a Ph.D. with major emphasis in the area of planning to meet most of the needs of the average school system. In fact it may be wiser to identify a member of the teaching or administrative staff who has some background of training and/or experience in these areas who is interested and committed to such work, and who is willing to work on a program of self-improvement in technical areas. Such a person can often understand and relate to the reality of the local situation very effectively, can develop those skills needed to do most of the local work, and can seek out advanced technical assistance in those relatively infrequent situations in which it must be applied.

While the financial considerations of a part-time or full-time planner/evaluator cannot be ignored or minimized, it is often true that many school districts, like many families, have adequate resources not only for the basic necessities but have some resources available to meet other priorities also. The average Wisconsin district has an enrollment of 2243 pupils and spends approximately $1200/pupil each year. That average budget of $2,691,000 per district if reallocated or increased by 1/2 of 1% would yield $13,455.00—a sum large enough to employ two or more part-time employees or perhaps fund one full-time position.

Some additional economy of scale may be obtained by a multi-district funding and sharing arrangement, such as those possible under sec. 66.30 of Wisconsin law, or through personnel services contracts with the respective Cooperative Educational Service Agency. While all districts have

unique characteristics in detail, there are many common problems and applications which exist among large numbers of districts. A perceptive, shared-time planner/evaluator should be able to apply general techniques and procedures in ways that are appropriate to meet specific local conditions.

Educational Quality and Problems of Perception

A basic assumption made in the preceeding pages is that many districts have not given educational planning the priority, the opportunity, and the resources necessary to improve the management of the local educational system. At the same time, it must be recognized that even if a serious local commitment is made, it is unlikely that all districts will meet the "quality" expectations of all the residents all the time. Part of the reason is found in the expression of "quality" itself. Quality is usually described in relative rather than absolute terms. No uniform standard of interpretation is fixed to it. It has different meanings and interpretations to different groups, consistent with their values, expectations and perceptions. It should appear obvious then, that public school systems find it difficult for a variety of reasons to win a "quality" rating from all the members of the community they serve. Some of these reasons may be that:

1. Numerous subpublics have differing expectations regarding the school system, and not all of these can be fulfilled equally at the same time. Limited resources make it necessary to decide among worthy alternatives.
2. Even if all public expectations were fulfilled at one time, the fact that some citizens disagree with the expectations and priorities of other people may mean that criticism will still exist.
3. Some demands and expectations at the local level may not originate in the community served; examples here are the requirements imposed by state and federal law. Meeting these requirements may be necessary, but will not always be viewed positively by the local residents.
4. Public expectations are subject to continuous change, and are usually influenced by societal conditions and factors beyond control of the school. A quality school system of 1965, if unchanged, may be viewed as deficient in the mid-1970's.
5. Public approval, or appraisal of quality, is often influenced by relatively limited contact with a small number of school district employes. Not all interpersonal relationships will be harmonious

under the best of conditions, especially when dozens or perhaps thousands of district employes are interacting daily with members of the community under a variety of circumstances and conditions. A "good" teacher, administrator, board member, or school program will not always appear so to all students, parents, and other local residents to the same degree at the same time.

6. The satisfaction of many residents with the school system is often directly proportional to the success and happiness of their child in the school situation. In addition, this clientel is constantly changing, i.e., students enter and leave the school system and parental interest often increases and decreases accordingly. While many residents have a continuing, serious interest in the schools regardless of whether they have children in school, many others have an interest only when their children are personally involved.

Conclusion

The preceeding pages have described a number of assumptions and viewpoints, and have offered several suggestions related to local school district planning and planning needs. No district will uniformly find each statement accurate or acceptable; they were merely provided to stimulate thought regarding the current state of planning, its function and use. If so accepted they have served a worthwhile purpose.

While this paper advances the idea that the implementation of appropriate planning strategies can increase the probability that local districts will successfully accomplish their mission, it does not guarantee that the developers and consumers of school programs and services will equally agree to the qualitative nature of the services provided. Recognizing this reality does not mean a defensive, status quo posture must or should be assumed. Virtually every district knows of managerial, administrative, and instructional deficiencies that exist and which should be addressed, even if total satisfaction of all needs can never realistically be attained. There is no more opportune time than the present to start the process of planned educational change.